MARVEL COMICS

#1
NOV

CONAN
VS.
RUNE

DIRECT EDITION

7 59606 04283 8 00111

$2.95 US $4.15 CAN

BARRY WINDSOR-SMITH

SEPARATION

WARRIOR

JOURNEY

DISRUPTION

Twenty-five years ago, a phenomenal team was born. Conan the Barbarian and artist Barry Windsor-Smith joined to debut what would evolve into a killer combination that altered the lore and landscape of Comics--A bold introduction of Sword and Sorcery as interpreted by a visionary young artist to a genre dominated by spandex-clad superheroes. Windsor-Smith's artistic evolution in the pages of those first two dozen issues of Conan is the stuff of comic book legend.

This special edition marks Barry's momentous return to Conan a quarter century after they first leapt onto the scene together.

Inspired by the challenge of having the mighty Cimmerian tangle with another of Windsor-Smith's comics creations, the millennia-old energy vampire RUNE, Barry and his colleagues at Windsor-Smith Studio briefly set aside their impassioned work on his three new creator-owned projects, The Freebooters™, Young Gods™, and The Paradoxman™, to produce this silver anniversary special. We trust it has been worth the wait...

Alex Bialy

CONAN™ VS. RUNE™ Vol. 1, No. 1, November, 1995. Published by MARVEL COMICS. Office of Publication: 387 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. Gerard Calabrese, President. Stan Lee, Publisher. Price: $2.95 per copy in the U.S. and $4.15 in Canada. GST #R127032852. Copyright © 1995 Conan Properties, Inc. All rights reserved. CONAN, and all related characters featured in this issue and the distinctive likenesses thereof are trademarks of Conan Properties, Inc. RUNE and the distinctive likeness thereof are trademarks and copyright © 1995 Malibu Comics Entertainment, Inc. All other material © 1995 Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc. All rights reserved. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons, and/or institutions in this magazine with those of any living or dead person or institution is intended, and any such similarity is purely coincidental. This periodical may not be sold except by authorized dealers and is sold subject to the condition that it shall not be distributed with any part of its cover or markings removed, nor in a mutilated condition. Printed in CANADA

CONAN CREATED BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

THE DARK GOD

RUNE CREATED BY BARRY WINDSOR-SMITH & CHRIS ULM

IT IS UNCOMMON FOR THOSE OF THE BROODING CIMMERIAN RACE TO SEEK THE SOLACE OF COMPANIONS. BUT AFTER FIVE DAYS WITH LITTLE MORE THAN THE SOUR FLESH OF LIZARDS IN HIS BELLY, THE OUTLANDER WONDERS IF THE BEDOUIN ENCAMPMENT, IN THE VALLEY BELOW, MIGHT OFFER SOME FLATBREADS -- AND PERHAPS A SUP OF THAT THIN BREW THEY CALL SHAKI -- TO A LONE TRAVELER IN THIS WASTELAND STATE CALLED TURAN.

SHINNING HIS WEARIED BEAST DOWN TOWARD THE RISING PLUME OF THE CAMPFIRE, CONAN FINGERS THE HILT OF THE BROADSWORD FLANKING HIS STEED...

STORY AND ART BY
BARRY WINDSOR-SMITH

FOR THOUGH HE WOULD RATHER EAT IN PEACE WITH THE NOMADS, HE MIGHT WELL HAVE NEED TO SHOW HIS STEEL FIRST.

BUT IT IS NO BUSTLING ENCAMPMENT THAT GREETS THE HUNGERING BARBARIAN.

A SINGLE TREE. SET AFIRE BY WHOM HE KNOWS NOT -- NOR IS ITS PURPOSE CLEAR, OTHER THAN AS A SIGNAL --

A BEACON --

MAYHAP A WARNING.

BELOW HIM THE DUNES GIVE WAY TO ROCK...

AND THE ROCK TO CARVED PILLARS AND BEATEN COPPER WALLS.

THE CLEARED STEPS AND PORTICO TELL CONAN THAT THIS HALF BURIED EDIFICE IS INHABITED THOUGH HE SEES NO SIGNS OF MOVEMENT.

WINDSOR-SMITH STUDIO
ALEX BIALY ASSISTANT INKS
ERIC HOPE COLORIST
JOON KOSTAR LETTERER

MARVEL COMICS
MIKE LACKEY EDITOR
CARL POTTS ED. IN CHIEF

HE WOULD LEAVE NOW, FOR THE UNNATURAL SILENCE OF THIS PLACE NETTLES BOTH HORSE AND RIDER ALIKE...

WERE IT NOT FOR... A GLINT...

THE SHIMMER OF A BLOOD-RED JEWEL LAYING JUST WITHIN THE FOOTINGS OF THE GIANT METAL DOORS.

IT IS A STONE OF SOME SIZE, DEFTLY CUT AND BOUNDED WITH TWINE. ITS GLEAM BECKONS LIKE A SIREN'S CALL...

AND WHETHER DROPPED BY A CORPULENT KING OR A CARELESS TRADER IS OF NO CONCERN TO THE BARBARIAN--

A SLIGHT GRATING FROM ABOVE...

ONLY THAT IT IS HIS FOR THE TAKING.

FOLLOWED BY A ROAR OF GRINDING GEARS--! LIKE A PANTHER HE LEAPS THE STEPS IN THREE QUICK BOUNDS, BUT HE IS TOO LATE--

THE HEAVY PORTAL SLAMS SHUT WITH DEAFENING FINALITY!

DAMN ME FOR A FOOL!

ENRAGED, CONAN HACKS AT THE HEAVY DOOR THAT SPITS SPARKS OF STEEL AGAINST BRONZE--

BUT OVER THE ECHOING CLAMOR HE HEARS ANOTHER NOISE--

IT IS THE SNORTING AND WHINNYING OF HIS STEED, LEFT OUTSIDE IN THE NIGHT--!

A THUNDERING OF HOOVES AND DEEP BLOWS AGAINST FLESH--!

AN AWFUL SNAPPING OF THICK RIBS AND SHRIEKS FROM THE TERRIFIED BEAST--

SOMEONE... OR SOME THING IS SLAUGHTERING HIS HORSE!

SILENCE.

NOW A DIFFERENT SOUND FROM BEYOND THE ANCIENT PORTAL: THE RENDING SLICK OF MEMBRANES TORN FROM THE BONE...

A RHYTHMIC GURGLE OF THICK, BLUE ARTERIES PUMPING BLOOD!

THERE IS A WILD BEAST OUT THERE, CONAN REALIZES...

ONE CANNY ENOUGH TO TRAP HIM WITHIN!

HE MUST DELVE DEEPER INTO THE BLACKENED CHAMBERS--SEARCH AMONG ITS SHADOWS TO FIND AN ESCAPE.

THE HALLS SEEM ENDLESS AS CONAN RUNS AND RUNS SILENTLY IN THE DARK, THEN...

CROM!

EYES BARELY ADJUSTING TO THE DARK, HE GRASPS FOR HIS FALLEN BLADE, BUT FINDS MORE THAN COLD STEEL--

FOR STREWN ABOUT THE CHAMBERS, HE SEES NOW, ARE THE GRISLY REMAINS OF MEN--

SAVAGED AS IF BY A MADDENED MONSTER!

HELP... ME

MITRA! YOU ARE ALIVE?!

I...BREATHE STILL.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THIS PLACE?

A TERRIBLE... UNHOLY... CREATURE... IN OUR MIDST.

LISTEN TO THIS, O-MAN...AND CARRY THESE WORDS...THAT ALL MANKIND MIGHT BE WARNED...

AYE, THE THING DESTROYED MY HORSE!

"WE FOUND HIM BROKEN AND BLOODIED IN THE DUNES BEYOND AGRAPUR--IT WAS AS IF HE HAD FALLEN FROM THE SKY FOR THE SANDS GAVE NO TRACE OF HIS COURSE.

"ARMORED IN THE BLACKEST STEEL WAS HE... STEEL THAT WAS RIPPED AS CLOTH IS RIPPED!

"HE HAD FOUGHT A BATTLE BEYOND COMPREHENSION... AND HE HAD LOST.

"FOR ONE HUNDRED DAYS WE TENDED HIS BROKEN BODY. IN HIS FEVERS HE RANTED IN TONGUES UNKNOWN TO THIS WORLD.

"DURING HIS RECOVERY HE SPOKE TO OUR ELDERS OF SUCH PHILOSOPHIES AS ONLY THE GODS MAY SPEAK.

"WE WERE IN AWE OF HE WHO CALLED HIMSELF... RUNE.

"BUT, EVENTUALLY, DEATH MOVED ON AND HE LIVED AGAIN.

"AS IF ATTENDING THE RESURRECTION OF HORUS HIMSELF, OUR PEOPLES FÊTED HIM AS HE FIRST WALKED AMONG US HEALED AND WHOLE.

"HE SPOKE BEFORE US ALL, FOR HE HAD MASTERED OUR LANGUAGE WITH EASE, UTTERING HIS GRATITUDE AND BLESSINGS.

"AS TIME PASSED WE BEGAN TO PERCEIVE HIM NOT AS A WARRIOR, NOR AS A SAGE--HE WAS A GOD, AND WE REVERED HIM AS SUCH.

"BUT WHEN HE WAS APPROACHED BY A YOUNG VOTARY...

"CLASPING HER HANDS AND SEEKING TO TOUCH LIPS TO HIS CHEEK, AS IS OUR PIOUS CUSTOM...

"THAT WAS THE INSTANT OUR WORLD AND ALL WITHIN...

"CRASHED INTO MADNESS!

"YOUNG, INNOCENT ISSA WAS THE FIRST TO DIE --

"SHE HAD BEEN ONE OF THOSE WHO HAD NURSED HIM SO DEVOTEDLY, WHO HAD GIVEN SO MUCH OF HERSELF TO SAVE THE LIFE... OF THE VERY INCARNATION OF DEATH!

"HE RIPPED HER HEAD FROM HER SHOULDERS AND DEVOURED IT WHOLE --

"AND WITH HIS DECEPTION ABANDONED HE GLOATED IN HIS DEPRAVITY!

"THEN, STORMING AMONG US AS WE FLAILED, HORROR STRUCK AND UNABLE TO PROTECT OURSELVES...

LET THE FEASTS COMMENCE!

"THE TRUE CARNAGE BEGAN."

HUNDREDS WERE CANNIBALIZED IN THE FIRST FEW DAYS...

ALL THE SONS OF THIS RAVAGED CITY, AYE -- AND THEIR SONS, TOO, ARE GONE. NO MAN HAS ESCAPED.

BUT I SHALL. COME, I WILL HELP YOU.

NO. LEAVE ME TO DIE.

WHAT TALK IS THAT? GET TO YOUR FEET, FELLOW.

AN UNFORTUNATE REQUEST, FOR YOU SEE...

I AM PART EATEN.

A HISS ESCAPES CONAN'S LIPS.

BUT PITY ME NOT--

FOR I AM BUT ONE OF THOUSANDS AND TENS OF THOUSANDS TO COME! GO, SPREAD THIS WARNING AFAR: THE DEVIL IS UPON THIS LAND--

LET ALL MEN... FEAR!

I AM LOST IN THESE DARK HALLS -- HOW DO I GET OUT?

=KAF!=

STEADY, MAN.

=KAF!--BELOW...

FOLLOW ALL COURSES DOWN... KAF= YOU WILL FIND... YOUR WAY.

BUT TREAD SOFT AND QUICK... KFE-FOR THE DEVIL IS EVERYWHERE.

AND I SHALL MAKE MY STAND WITH IT IF I HAVE TO

MAY ISHTAR PRESERVE YOU... KAFE AND MAY I BEG OF YOUR MERCY, O-MAN?

AYE.

A MUTTERED PRAYER...

A FLASH OF COLD STEEL...

AND IT IS DONE.

IF YOUR GODS STILL LISTEN... SPEAK TO THEM NOW.

BLADE THRUST BEFORE HIM, THE BARBARIAN CASTS WARILY INTO THE THICKENING GLOOM...

AS HE PEERS DEEPER...

KNOWING THAT DEATH COULD STRIKE FROM ANY SHADOW AT ANY MOMENT.

THE PUTRID FETOR OF THE DEAD BLISTERING HIS EYES...

A FAINT MURMUR CAN BE HEARD AHEAD OF HIM AND HE STRAINS TO DETERMINE ITS SOURCE...

IT IS AS IF A MILLION FEEBLE VOICES ARE TALKING ALL AT ONCE.

PERHAPS THEY ARE GHOSTS. CONAN MUSES, AND HIS SKIN PRICKLES AT THE THOUGHT.

EACH TREAD INTO THE CATACOMBS BRINGS HIM CLOSER TO THE SOUNDS.

HUMMING, BUZZING...

CLICKING SOUNDS.

AN UPDRAFT RELIEVES THE STENCH MOMENTARILY AND THE SHADOWS RISE FROM LIGHT BELOW--WARM NIGHT AIR FILLS HIS LUNGS--

AND THE MURMUR--THE DRONING OF A MILLION BLOATED PARASITES, FEASTING UPON THE DEAD, RISES TO A DIZZYING PITCH--

AS CONAN STANDS BEFORE A VISION FROM HELL!

GREAT CROM AND MITRA!

NOT EVEN ON THE STARK BATTLEFIELDS OF VENARIUM HAS CONAN WITNESSED SUCH AFTERMATH OF SAVAGERY--

NOR CRUELTY SO DEPRAVED -- SO INHUMAN!

IN THIS ONCE IDYLLIC COURTYARD THOUSANDS LAY SLAIN AND GUTTED--

AND DISCARDED AT WHIM, BY A DARK GOD ..

CALLED RUNE.

CONAN'S THOUGHTS OF FLEEING THIS CITY OF HORROR ARE WEIGHED AGAINST A RISING DESIRE FOR RETRIBUTION...

FOR ALTHOUGH HE MIGHT NORMALLY SNEER AT THE PERFUMED SUPERFICIES OF THE CIVILIZED WORLD, HIS DEEPEST SENSE NOW IS

PITY.

HIS STEEL-TINT EYES SURVEY THE CARNAGE. LIKE A WOLF AT BAY HE MEASURES HIS CHANCES OF SURVIVAL...IN A BATTLE WITH ONE SO MALEVOLENT.

THEN, LIFTING HIS SWORD WITH BOTH HANDS. HE ROARS HIS CHALLENGE --

BEAST--!

DEVOURER OF MEN!

SHOW YOURSELF--! FOR I AM HERE TO KILL YOU!

THE GROTESQUE THRONE SHATTERS UNDER CONAN'S BLADE--

AND, AS IF IN ANSWER TO HIS FURY, THUNDER CRASHES ABOVE HIM--

AND LIGHTNING SPLITS THE SKY!

LIKE A RIPPING WIND--

MOVING AT IMPOSSIBLE SPEED--

THE DARK GOD IS UPON HIM!

ALMOST SENSELESS FROM THE MIND-REELING IMPACT, THE BARBARIAN CAN ONLY GASP AT THE DEVIL-THING THAT HOLDS HIM DOWN IN AN IRON-FAST GRIP!

DID YOU THINK TO PROTECT YOURSELF WITH THIS SWORD, HUMAN?!

I SHOULD CUT OFF YOUR HEAD WITH IT!

BEG FOR MERCY--

BEG TO YOUR GOD--!

SAY YOUR LAST PRAYER-- TO ME!

GO TO HELL!

AH! YOUR MEAT IS SPICED--I SHALL RELISH YOU ALL THE MORE. .

PRAY TO ME, LITTLE PINK MAN, AS I

Uhhn!

I PRAY TO NO ONE, DOG!

AND YOU'LL NOT TASTE MY BLOOD THIS NIGHT!

WHAT IS THIS? A HOTSPUR AMONG THE CATTLE!

HOW HAVE YOU HIDDEN SO LONG FROM ME. ?

I AM NO WEAK-LIVERED TURANIAN RABBIT HIDING IN SHADOWS --!

CIMMERIAN, AM I!

AND IF HELL IS MY COURSE--I'LL TAKE YOU WITH ME!

AND FOR THAT CIMMERIA, YOU HAVE NEED OF YOUR BLADE, HNN?

ARE THE MEN OF CIMMERIA SO CRAVEN AS TO STRIKE THE UNSHIELDED--THE WEAPONLESS?

IS IT FEAR THAT GRIPS YOUR SWORD, CIMMERIA--?

WEAK-LIMBED TERROR AT THE SIGHT OF THE DARK GOD?

CAN YOU NOT FACE ME WITHOUT STEEL TO QUELL YOUR COWARDICE?

IT IS A RUSE AND CONAN KNOWS IT--

BUT THE TAUNTS THAT STING HIS FIERCE PRIDE...

BLUR INTO THE BLOODLUST OF A WARRIOR BORN!

AND THE STRUGGLE BEGINS.

AMID THE GORY CUD OF A CIVILIZED WORLD.

CHAMPIONED BY A SAVAGE FROM THE WIND-RIPPED HILLS OF THE NORTHLANDS!

YOU WILL PRAY TO ME BEFORE YOU DIE, CIMMERIA!

YOU WILL FALL TO YOUR KNEES--

AND PRAY TO RUNE, THE DARK GOD!

THE BARBARIAN DOES NOT HEED HIS TERRIBLE FOE--

FOR THE DEVIL IS WILY--A TRICKSTER--

USING WORDS FOR COMBAT.

AND ROCK-HARD FISTS, TOO

FALL BEFORE ME, CIMMERIA!

UPANI!

BUT THE MORE HE IS MOCKED THE GREATER ARE CONAN'S BLOWS--!

HIS FISTS PUMMELLING WITH THE DRIVING RAIN, TIL.

RUNE IS THE FIRST TO FALL!

UKK!

WITHOUT PAUSE, THE BLOODIED DEMON BRINGS CONAN, ALSO, TO THE GROUND--

I HAVE DESTROYED A MILLION SOULS FOR LESS THAN THAT--!

YOU SHALL REGRET THAT AUDACITY, CIMMERIA!

Uhh!

AND I WILL NOT TOLERATE SUCH INDIGNITIES FROM YOU!

I AM RUNE!

WARLORD OF THE GALAXIES!

AND YOU PINK CREATURE, ARE BUT A TINY RODENT, SQUIRMING IN MY GRIP!

URN!

I SHALL TORMENT YOU AT WILL-

CUT YOU AT MY PLEASURE--

AH!

AND FEAST ON YOUR SMOKING FLESH!

NOW PRAY TO ME, CIMMERIA--

AND LAMENT BEFORE YOUR GOD!

THIS IS FOR MY HORSE!

AIAE!

AND THIS, VERMIN, IS FOR YOU!

GUSTILY SLAMMING BLOW AFTER BLOW INTO FACE OR CHEST --WHEREVER THERE IS AN OPENING--!

IN A THRASH OF BLOOD RED LIMBS, CONAN IS UPON THE SHRIEKING DEMON--

LUNGS HEAVING, THE CIMMERIAN FIGHTS LIKE A MADDENED BEAST, HAMMERING HIS FISTS AS THE SKIN SPLITS AWAY, BARING WHITE BONE AND GRISTLE!

FINALLY, THE STAMINA OF THE DARK GOD GIVES WAY TO THE RELENTLESS, POUNDING ONSLAUGHT--

AND THE THING SHUDDERS UNDER CONAN'S WEIGHT

HIS POWERFUL FINGERS TENSE ABOUT THE MONSTER'S THROAT!

KK

A JAWBONE SNAPS UP WITH TERRIBLE FORCE--!

AND RIBS CRACK AROUND AN INHUMAN HEART OOZING INWARD

ONLY THEN DOES THE CREATURE LAY STILL UNDER THE THUNDER AND HAMMERING RAIN

BUT CONAN'S GASPING BREATH, TOO IS HALTED--

THE JEWELS--

THE SAME THAT ENSNARED HIM EARLIER THIS NIGHT OF NIGHTS - GLOW LIKE MIRRORED MOONS IN A RAINBOW SKY--

CROM!

AND WHERE RAIN FALLS, STEAM ARISES--

AS LIFE BURSTS ANEW IN BLOOD RED EYES!

NO! YOU'LL NOT LIVE AGAIN, MONSTER!

Uhh...

YAAAARGH!!

BUT AS CONAN GRASPS THE PULSING GEMS, BURNING ENERGY CRACKLES ABOUT HIM, AS FIRE, AS IF FROM THE STARS THEMSELVES, RIPPLES THROUGH HIS MIGHTY THEWS.

AND IN THE THROB OF ONE HEARTBEAT

THE BARBARIAN IS SEIZED BY THE CLAMOR OF A BILLION SOULS SCREAMING IN HORROR AND UNCEASING TORMENT!

THEN, RISING UP LIKE SOME GARGANTUAN MONOLITH AMONG THE BURNING STARS STANDS THE CONQUERER RUNE, SCOURGE OF ALL GALAXIES ACROSS THE UNIVERSE!

THE VISION SHIFTS AND CONAN STANDS TRANSFIXED IN HORROR...

AS AGONIZING WAILS OF COUNTLESS INNOCENTS PUT TO TORCH ECHO ACROSS ETERNITY--

AS ENTIRE CULTURES, SLAIN IN HEDONISTIC RITUALS, SCREAM AGAIN INTO THE COLD ABYSS!

MONSTROUS BEETLES CLAMBER UPON WORLDS -- SUCKING LIFE BLOOD, AS ONE WOULD TAKE JUICE FROM A BERRY.

THESE CREATURES, CONAN KNOWS, ARE THE DARK GOD--

IN OTHER SHADES..

BY OTHER NAMES--

THEN, STRUGGLING AGAINST A THICK SEA OF BLACK BLOOD AND HUMAN FLESH, THE CIMMERIAN IS BESIEGED BY SNAPPING, CRAWLING BEASTS--

WITH HIS LIMBS SHAKING AS IF TO JAR APART, THE MIGHTY BARBARIAN CAN DO ALIGHT BUT...

CUTTING AT HIM, WORMING THEIR WAY INTO EVERY HOLE AND CREVICE--

WEIGHTING HIM DOWN TO SUFFOCATE AND DESTROY HIM; TO EAT HIM ALIVE FROM THE INSIDE OUTWARD--!

AAAA

SCREAM!

AAAAAAA

But his horror stricken cry is drowned in the surging, atonal choir of a universe of dolorous souls that perished in the bloodied grip of Rune, the dark god--the Prince of Void!

AAAAGGHHHHHGGH!

Again and anew, the foul stench of the dead invades Conan's nostrils, burning into his lungs, like the sulfur of Hades.

He is alive!

And he is alone--

All but for the ghastly human debris of a small city in the eastern desert of Turan.

If this night could be but a dream...

But no, Conan does not dream--

THIS NIGHT HE HAS FACED THE DEVIL INCARNATE.

UNSTEADILY, HIS BRAIN REELING FROM COUNTLESS BLOWS AND PHANTASMS, HE RISES FROM THE BLOODY MIRE...

WHY HE LIVES... HE KNOWS NOT.

AND YET...

IF AN ANSWER HE NEEDS...PERHAPS IT IS THERE -- SCRAWLED IN BLOOD ACROSS THE PITTED MARBLE --

WHILST BELOW BURNS A LURID EFFIGY--

THAT WHICH REMAINS OF HIS STEED, SPLUTTERING AND DRIPPING STICKY FLESH. TO CONAN, THE MESSAGE IS CLEAR--

SEEK NO MERCY FROM...THE DARK GOD!

WHAT THEN, IS THE PURPOSE OF THESE SYMBOLS?

THEIR MEANING IS BEYOND THE CIMMERIAN'S GRASP--

BUT STILL...AN ICY CHILL OF DOOM FINGERS DEEP INTO HIS SOUL.

CONAN GRAPPLES AT HIS BURNING SWORD, HIS NUMB FISTS BLISTERING WITHOUT SENSATION--

EERILY, THE SKULL NODS SLIGHTLY.

CONAN KNOWS THAT WHATEVER EVIL THE DARK GOD HAS WROUGHT HERE--

IT IS BUT THE BEGINNING OF A REIGN OF HORROR THAT HIS WORLD HAS NEVER KNOWN--

NOR COULD EVER IMAGINE BEFORE NOW.

THE MYSTIC FLAMES BURST LIKE STARFIRE AMONG THE DEAD--

AND CONSUME ALL FLESH--

AS IF TO PRESAGE THE HOLOCAUST TO COME.

FATEFUL WORDS ECHO IN THE CIMMERIAN'S HEAD...

"GO. SPREAD THIS WARNING AFAR: THE DEVIL IS UPON THIS LAND--

"LET ALL MEN FEAR!"

"IF YOUR GODS STILL LISTEN ...SPEAK TO THEM NOW."

FIN